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ABSTRACT

A multidimensional perspective is provided of the achievement and educational experiences elementary school students of Mexican origin in a major northern city. To deepen understanding of the complex interplay of factors that ultimately cause many of these students to become educational casualties, traditional research methods of ethnography were used, including long-term on-site participation and observation, open-ended interviews with eight student-parent pairs, and descriptive data. Five longitudinal case studies provided information on the lives and school experiences of these students who are at risk of dropping out of school. The data indicate that only in two cases were the students well on their way to successful completion of high school and beyond. It is concluded that dropouts are made, not born, and that the chain of events leading to dropping out of school is forged in elementary school, with consequences visible only later. The school success of children of Mexican origin is an interactively determined phenomenon that depends on the following three environments that mold the child: (1) family; (2) school; and (3) barrio (neighborhood, ward, or district). A list of 12 references and a summary of theories about caste, collusion, and conflict are appended. (SLD)

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Caste, Collusion and Conflict: An Ethnographic Study of Factors Affecting the Dropout Rate of Mexican Origin Students in a Barrio Elementary School in Chicago.

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SUMMARY

The alarmingly high rate of dropout among Mexican origin students in the United States has been well-documented statistically, but little has been written on the school experiences of these students in barrio elementary schools of northern states. This study fills the gap by providing a multidimensional perspective on the achievement and educational experiences of Mexican origin elementary school students in a major northern city. The goal is to contribute to a deepened understanding of the complex interplay of factors which ultimately lead to many of these students becoming educational casualties.

The research methods of this study are those traditional to the ethnographic genre: long-term on-site participation and observation, open-ended interviews and descriptive data. The open-ended interviews with students, parents, and school personnel provided information on their feelings perceptions, and opinions on education. In addition, five longitudinal case studies describe the lives and school experiences of these potential dropouts/pushouts.

Although the study was exploratory and descriptive, several conclusions emerged. Dropouts are made, not born. The chain of events leading to dropout is forged in the elementary school, but the consequences are only visibly ratified later. The school success of Mexican origin students is an interactively determined phenomenon dependent on the combined cooperation and involvement of the three environments which mold the child: family, school, and barrio.

CASTE, COLLUSION AND CONFLICT: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF FACTORS AFFECTING THE DROPOUT OF MEXICAN-AMERICAN STUDENTS IN A CHICAGO BARRIO ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Background and Statement of the Problem

The recent explosive growth of the Mexican-American population in all geographic areas of the United States has served to bring to light two problems of concern to the hitherto somewhat silent Hispanic community: the continuing undereducation, or miseducation, of Mexican-American youth and the minimal upward movement of Mexican-Americans into the economic mainstream. The problems of a high dropout rate, low levels of scholastic achievement, and discrimination in education and employment have been cited as factors contributing to the relegation of Mexican-Americans to the lowest rungs of the socioeconomic ladder in American society (Weinberg, 1977).

The problem of a high dropout rate does not, however, begin in the high school. While the effect is clearly evident at the high school and college years, the genesis and root of the problem is in evidence by the early elementary years (Lloyd, 1978). The United States Commission on Civil Rights (United States Commission on Civil Rights, 1978) used statistics from the five southwestern states with the highest Mexican-origin populations to link clearly success in the elementary school years to successful high school and post-secondary education. The inverse is equally evident: a student who does poorly at the elementary school level will in all probability also do poorly at the high school level and will run a high risk of becoming a dropout.

While statistics can document the dimensions and gravity of the problem, and point to socioeconomic correlates, they cannot, alone, reveal the inner workings of the processes which lead to school failure and early leaving for

so many Hispanic students. To understand the human and institutional conditions which produce such tragic results, we must turn to qualitative methods of research.

Purpose and Goal of the Study

The purpose of this study was to present a picture -- as perceived by the involved participants -- of the education afforded Mexican-origin elementary school students in an urban barrio school in a major northern metropolis. The goal was to enable the reader to gain an understanding of the effects of the three environments -- barrio, family, and school -- which determine, to a degree, the path a student will take in the completion or abandonment of his journey through the educational institutions maintained by society's dominant class. The qualitative approach was chosen to provide an ethnographically oriented description of the environment, and to present interviews so that the reader might see the situation through the eyes -- and from the varied phenomenological perspectives -- of the mothers, the teachers, and the students themselves.

Accordingly, the focus of this study was the Mexican-origin barrio elementary school student. Specifically, the task was to find an answer to the question, succinctly expressed, "Why do so many barrio students drop out -- or not drop out?" The goal was to obtain insights which might ultimately help to change the seemingly inexorable downward path facing so many of these students.

As just articulated, the question guiding this research may appear on the suface to be fairly straightforward, but in reality it is quite complex. The complexity arises from the interactive impact on the student of the major

environmental contexts surround him or her: family, barrio, and school. Thus the general research question was subdivided into three in order to gain an understanding of the effect of each of these environments on the student's school performance:

1. What is the relationship between family characteristics and student success/failure?
2. What is the relationship between the extra-familial barrio context and student success/failure?
3. What is the relationship between the barrio school's current educational policies and practices and student success/failure?

It was hypothesized that the dropout is affected by, and reacts to, individuals and conditions comprising these three envirnoments. It follows, therefore, that the potential dropout cannot be viewed in isolation; the three environments, often including opposing forces, must be a part of any study which seeks to provide an adequate understanding of the phenomenon.

Definition of Terms

Barrio: A neighborhood, a ward, or a district. Its use is that of participants in the study.

Dropout: A student who has not been in attendance at a school for a period of fifteen school days and has not been registered in or graduated from an accredited educational institution. (Morrow, 1986)

High-risk student: A student with a record of high absenteeism.

Hispanic: an umbrella term which includes all who speak Spanish or are of Spanish-speaking parentage.

Low-risk student: A student with a perfect or near-perfect record of attendance.

Mexican origin, Mexican-American: used to differentiate between various Hispanic groups where data are disaggregated into information relative to a national/ethnic group, e.g., Mexican, Puerto Rican, etc. Mexican origin refers to a person with at least one Mexican parent. Mexican-American refers to persons of Mexican origin who are residing legally in the United States.

Pariah: A student whose behavior or achievement has relegated him to the lowest levels of the classes in the school; a student who is held in low esteem by the school and the faculty. (McDermott, 1974)

Pushout: A student who has been formally, because of age, or informally, because of misbehavior, dropped or transferred from the school's attendance rolls.

Rebel: A Mexican origin adolescent who is estranged from and rejects society, both Mexican and American; one who follows no law but his own and that of his fellow rebels. (Paz, 1961)

Subjects

Two groups of subjects were chosen for this research: a longitudinal case study group and a group of student-parent pairs. All of the student subjects were enrolled as students in a public elementary school located in the barrio area of the city, during 1985-1987.

The subjects of the longitudinal case studies were identified and selected using the following criteria: a long history of discipline referrals, a history of non-attendance, age 12 or older, and average or above average scores on

school-administered intelligence tests. They all voluntarily agreed to be observed and interviewed. They were all observed from fourth grade to the seventh grade. One subject was observed from kindergarten to his eventual pushout in the eighth grade.

The second group of subjects included students from the fourth grade and the seventh grade. Two seventh-grade classrooms were randomly chosen -- one bilingual, one English-only -- from among the six seventh-grade classrooms in the school. Two fourth-grade classrooms were similarly chosen at random from the six fourth-grade classrooms.

Within each classroom, lists were made of students with perfect or near-perfect attendance and of students classified as truants. One student was selected randomly from each list. The former were designated "low-risk" and the latter "high-risk" with respect to their potential for dropping out. Three additional names had been drawn from each of the eight lists to be used as alternates in the event that the parents of the eight selected students had declined to participate in the interviews. The original eight students, their parents, and their teachers were all willing to participate in the research and thus became the subjects of the in-depth interviews.

All participants in the case studies, the student-parent interviews, and the teacher interviews agreed to have their interviews recorded on tape. Forty interviews, ranging in length from forty minutes to three hours, were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Methodology

The study can best be classified as a topic-oriented study, conducted in the ethnographic mode (Hymes,1980). As a long-time participant in the school

and community, I was able to draw on my previous experience to formulate reserach questions and streategies, and to facilitate my entry into the research setting as a participant-become-observer.

This study differs from the majority of educational ethnographies in not focussing on classroom observations, although I did enter classrooms and observe teachers and students in the classroom settings countless times. I wished to gain as holistic a picture of the barrio child as possible from as many perspectives as possible. Thus, my concern was to interview, to converse with, and -- through these avenues -- to examine the feelings, the thoughts, and the perceptions expressed by those who were kind enough to grant me time and access to their lives and their homes: the students, their parents, their teachers, and other school personnel. I sought to gather information on how each group viewed education in the barrio.

The formal research was conducted over a period of three years. During two of those years I was a participant and observer in the school of which I have written. For over a decade I had been the assigned assistant principal in this barrio school. It was from this perspective that I had developed the intuitive, later formalized, hypotheses and the experiences from which this study developed.

In order to freely undertake the phase which included the intensive interviewing, I resigned from the school system and spent the period from October 1986 through May 1987 in the research school and community. During this final period, I visited other barrio schools, talked to and visited the homes of parents and community persons, and interviewed district personnel in other locations. It was during this period, too, that I interviewed

teachers and students in the school, and parents of the subject students in their homes.

Following the final year of fieldwork research, I entered the analysis phase: re-playing and listening to the many tapes, returning to the literature, and reflecting and searching for the themes which emerged through the recorded conversations, and through the written materials of the barrio children. Some of the data were collected and ultimately used to establish the insights and attitudes of the students and their families. These were open-ended interviews held with eight student-parent pairs; interviews with the "rebels" -- subjects of the longitudinal case studies -- and one rebel's mother (herself a dropout); essays written by the bilingual program and regular program fifth-graders; and a job-preference survey completed by the seventh-grade students. The rest of the data was collected and used to examine the attitudes, experiences and opinions of educators working in the subject school. This data included interviews with the teachers of the rebels; surveys which were anonymously and voluntarily completed by the school's professional staff; open-ended interviews with the district's support staff -- the truant officer, the social worker, the psychologist; and interviews with administrators of the school's programs.

Framework and Hypotheses

Lucius Cervantes (1966), whose work on dropouts provided the initial framework for this research, developed a dropout prediction table listing twenty points characteristic of troubled, unsuccessful, dropout-prone students. He found that the typical dropout has problems in school achievement, high absenteeism or truancy, and a history of disciplinary problems. Typically, he

comes from a single-parent home, often with many siblings, inconsistent love and discipline, and little family communication. His friends and peers were frequently both the source of family disapproval and the source of his school problems. Finally, his school experiences are almost totally negative, and he saw his teachers as neither friendly nor helpful.

Cervantes concluded that the greater the number of these characteristics in the background of a student, the greater the likelihood that the abandonment of formal education would occur. Yet, he cautioned that no single list can unerringly predict the dropout. Circumstance and a turn of events can alter the life of any individual. Cervantes concluded that if the teen-ager had a primary relationship favorable to his remaining in school, the other disadvantages might be overcome.

Following the Cervantes study, this research used the ethnographically-oriented interview to approach the problem and to focus on the two elements which have been most often singled out in the research of others: absenteeism/truancy and disciplinary problems. The research agenda of the study also included factors noted in the research literature as being common to the dropout: the influence of the parent, parental background and aspirations, and, in the case of the language minority student, parental influence on primary language retention by the student.

The final theoretical framework for this research study was developed from a series of hypotheses:

(1) If the family environment is positive, then the student is more likely to have a successful school experience.

(2) If the school environment is positive, then the student is more likely to have a successful school experience.

(3) If the teachers convey high, positive expectations of the student, then the student is more likely to have a successful school experience.

(4) If the school's policies and practices are positive, then the student is more likely to have a successful school experience.

(5) If the barrio/societal environment is a positive, safe environment, then the student is more likely to have a positive school experience.

(6) If the barrio/societal environment is perceived by the child and the parents as an open environment, then the child will stay in school and pursue an education.

From these hypotheses, the main hypotheses can be derived:

(1) If the family, school, and barrio/societal environments are positive, interrelated, and cooperative, then the child is likely to stay in school.

(2) If at least two of the three environments are positive, interrelated, and cooperative, then there is a good probability that the child will stay in school.

(3) If fewer than two of the three environments are positive, interrelated, and cooperative, then there is a high probability that the child won't stay in school.

These hypotheses were the basis for the questions which guided the ethnographic interviews and the later data analysis. In keeping with the qualitative nature of the study, the data were not the subjected to statistical analysis.

Three other theories regarding the education and treatment of minorities in society -- which I have termed *caste*, *collusion* and *conflict* -- contributed to the theoretical underpinnings of this study. In his caste theory, Ogbu (1974, 1978) argues that Mexican-Americans are perceived as members of a caste-like minority and, as such, are both educated and socialized to accept the political and economic subordination appropriate to their caste-like status. According to the collusion theory (McDermott, 1974; McDermott and Gospodinoff, 1978), the failure of minority children to achieve school success is explained both by the development of the pariah-like student and in the acts of collusion by teacher and student leading to student failure. Under the theory of conflict, Fernandez and Marenco (1980) view the educational failure of subordinated minorities -- Mexican-Americans among them -- as the natural outcome of group conflict and control of the educational system by the dominant majority for its benefit. A more detailed description of each of these theories is provided in the Appendix.

Results of the Analysis

From data collected over three years, I was able to find support for the hypotheses given above. Various data sources and my own knowledge of the school and the community converged to confirm a picture of collusion/cooperation, caste-like structure, and conflict-ridden bureaucratic schools and societal institutions.

Evidence from the eight student-parent interviews and the five case studies indicated that only in two cases were the students well on their way to successful completion of high school and beyond.

In those two cases, the students came from intact families -- families in which the parents communicated to the school and to the children their concern for their children's education. In both homes, books were in evidence and the children were assisted and encouraged by their fathers.

In five cases, the outlook was not good. Although the parents (mothers) tried to encourage the children in their education, they seemed powerless to help their children in the tasks of school. Although these parents wanted to see their children succeed, their homes were bereft of the supportive materials and experiences that would contribute to the educational background of the students.

All of the parents wanted their children to go on in their education, yet they were fearful of the conditions in the local high school which their children were almost certain to attend. The high school had severe drug and gang problems, and had, as of late 1988, had the second-highest dropout rate in the city. Most of the mothers saw no alternatives for these students.

All of the parents were equally concerned about the effects of the city-wide Code of Uniform Discipline and its widely used suspension of students from school. Again, they felt powerless to affect the system in any way.

Most striking were the longitudinal case study subjects and the results of the interviews with them and with others about them. Each student is viewed by the school and their teachers as a *pariah*, and they themselves present the perfect picture of the rebel. Yet they did well in the early years of school.

Three of the boys were destined to be pushouts from the research site to a city school for maladjusted, behavioral problem students. All of the boys had been the subjects of special needs analysis by the school system, all had been judged to be average or above in intelligence, yet all were achieving far below level and had long histories of behavior problems.

One of the boys, Lalo, had early on been placed in classes where he was out of sight, and where he was most often taught not by teachers but by aides. In response, he was not often in school; he had learned the misbehavior patterns which were rewarded by suspension and he used them often.

Another case study student was a chronic truant, Jimmy, whose mother abetted his anti-school behavior by supplying confirmation of "legal" absence. The principal, the teachers, his mother, the boy and the legal system in collusion ignored him and he ignored them. Pushed out at the age of 15, his reading ability was at the second grade as were his math skills.

Finally, the most telling case study was that of a boy, Hermosillo, whose school career was studied from kindergarten to his eventual pushout in the eighth grade. Obviously bright, perhaps gifted, he had achieved far above the norm throughout his school career, in spite of his frequent absences beginning in the fourth grade. In spite of his obvious intelligence and ability to keep up with the classes and do excellent work, the record shows little concern, caring, or communication between the teachers and the boy.

Main Findings and Conclusions

The main conclusion emanating from this study was positive factors in only one environment were insufficient to guard against dropout by the

Mexican-origin student. At least two environments must be positive and supportive in nature if dropout is to be avoided.

Secondly, and perhaps equally important, was the finding emerging from this research that while much of the past research has tended to focus on only one environment (family, school, barrio/societal), these must all be considered and investigated in order to arrive at a full and complete picture of the successful student.

Finally, much of the past research has been based on work which is undertaken at the high-school level, where the act of dropping out is a *fait accompli*. This study indicates clearly, I argue, that more research and ameliorative efforts must be focused at the early elementary years, at the latest by the fifth grade.

I found evidence to support the favorable primary relationship theory of Cervantes (1966). I found evidence of collusion, this in support of the work of McDermott and Gospodinoff (1974). I found evidence of conflict, this in support of the work of Fernandez and Marenco (1980). I found evidence of caste-system structure, this in support of the work of Ogbu (1974, 1978).

Yet each of these researchers, I maintain, while supported by my research, stopped short of drawing the complete picture. I would argue that it is in the examining of the interactive effects of the three environments taken together that one can best isolate the characteristics contributing to student dropout.

My work indicated that the most successful students emerge from situations which include positive and cooperative interrelationships among the components of the three environments. Conversely, the dropout is most likely

to emerge in those situations in which fewer than two of the environments are providing positive reinforcements for his/her success in school.

Implications

The implications of this report are varied. Extensive efforts, primarily financial, have been directed to affect educational institutions at the secondary level. It is essential to direct research funding and efforts to encompass the remaining environments.

Efforts must be directed toward the familial environment so as to affect the education of children at the early, formative years of schooling. Innovative efforts must be made to increase the cooperative influence of schools and parents in the education of Mexican origin children.

Efforts must be directed toward improvement of school policies and practices. Educators, in particular at the elementary level, must be made cognizant of the need to develop and use motivational programs and curricula in order to engage and encourage young students in educational enterprises. The educational institutions must early establish lines of communication and cooperation with the parents of young students.

Efforts must be directed toward creating an open society where educational effort, achievement, and attainment will result in commensurate advancement, both educational and economic. The closed society of the barrio with its limited opportunities for advancement, its limited educational opportunities, and limited role models has served to color the perceptions of Mexican-origin students as to the futility of engagement and persistence in society's educational institutions.

APPENDIX

CASTE, COLLUSION, CONFLICT: THE THEORIES

Cervantes's work (1968) on the dropout provided the initial foundation for this research. The three works summarized below were invaluable in the ongoing analysis, which is characteristic of ethnographic research, and the final analysis of the data which was collected.

Caste. The work of John Ogbu flows from his typology of American's minorities into three classes: autonomous, immigrant and caste-like. Caste-like minorities include Mexican origin persons and are characterized by the following: 1) they are held in low esteem by the majority; 2) they have been drawn into the majority society largely against their will; and 3) they have been both educated and socialized to accept a subordinated role in society.

Faced with barriers in education and social mobility, the children of the caste-like minorities lose their motivation to achieve academically and withdraw from the educational institutions governed and structured by the majority.

Collusion. From the work of McDermott (1974) and McDermott and Gospodinoff (1975) are drawn two powerful concepts: the development of the "pariah" and the unspoken agreement -- collusion -- between teacher and pariah-student to engage in classroom actions and reactions which ensure that the student will neither learn in the academic environment nor progress in the larger societal environment.

McDermott points out that the pariah-student is not born a pariah, but evolves from the political environment and matures in the negative pariah/host relationship.

Conflict. Fernandez and Marenco (1980) write of public education in America from the viewpoint of group conflict. They envision society as being divided into three groups: dominant, subdominant, and subordinated. Persons of Mexican origin are largely to be found in the subordinated group, a group characterized by its lack of financial and political power. One can most easily envision the society described by Fernandez and Marenco if one pictures the three social groups as forming a pyramid, with the apex containing the small dominant class, the larger subdominant class forming the middle section and the base consisting of the subordinated minorities. This pyramidal structure characterizes not only society at large but the educational institutions of the society.

The failure of Mexican Americans to achieve in the educational environment, according to these authors, is largely based on the fact that the dominant group in America has structured the educational institutions so as to benefit their own group's power and dominance. The subordinated group attends schools which do little to allow them to advance educationally or economically. With few exceptions, the schools insure that the dominant group will remain dominant and the subordinated group will remain powerless and subordinated.

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